

The Causes and Consequences of Local Voting in Solomon Islands



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The Paradox of Poor Political Governance in Solomon Islands

Poor political governance in Solomon Islands appears paradoxical. The country is not well governed: in 2012 it ranked in the bottom 25 per cent of all countries globally in World Bank measures of government effectiveness and regulatory quality (World Bank 2013). As in most states, its politicians are a major determinant of governance: they manage or mismanage ministries; they legislate or fail to legislate; they deal with, or cut deals with, extractive industries. In the Solomons case, with occasional exceptions, governance indicators suggest they do not do this well.

Yet Solomon Islands is also a democracy. It holds regular, and relatively free and fair national elections. And here lies the paradox: few Solomon Islanders are happy with the performance of their political rulers, yet they continue to vote for candidates who govern the country poorly.

Local Voting

Figure 1 is derived from responses to a question asked in the 2011 People's Survey (ANU Enterprise 2011). In it, voters were asked why they voted for the candidate they voted for in the 2010 national elections. To create the chart, I have removed responses that are too broad to be interpretable (such as 'Because I liked the candidate') and I have focused on people's first responses to the question (they were allowed up to three; results change little when based on all responses).

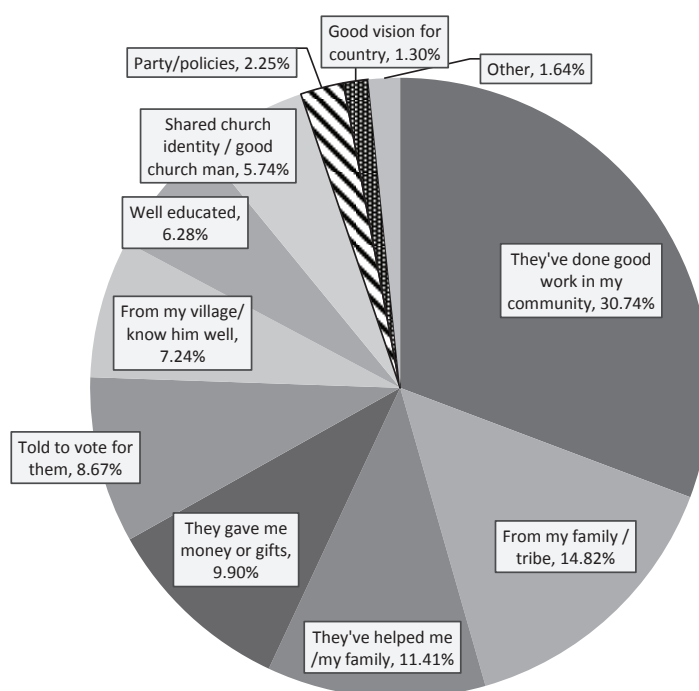
There is much of potential interest in the chart, but most significant for the paradox described above is that only two of the responses — 'Party/Policies' and 'Good vision for country' (together totalling 3.55 per cent) — pertain to national politics. All of the others, to the extent they reveal spatial preferences, suggest voters choose primarily

on the basis of local considerations. My own fieldwork revealed a similar story. Almost all of my interviewees (voters, community leaders, candidates, and past and present MPs) described voting in search of personal or local benefits.

The Vicious Cycle of Local Voting

Voting locally is a sensible act in a poorly governed state. In Solomon Islands, the government is both weak and cumbersome; its reach into most people's lives is minimal and, because national political movements are non-existent, the outcome of political contestation in any individual electorate is decoupled from the potential to change this. Under such circumstances, the only way elections are likely to bring improvements for voters is if they vote for a candidate who will help them or their community directly. This is the logic of local voting.

Figure 1: 'Why did you vote for the candidate you voted for?'



Yet by voting this way, voters contribute to poor governance. MPs who serve the country well are not rewarded, and MPs who perform poorly nationally are not punished. It is local performance that counts electorally. This gives MPs an incentive to focus on the local at the expense of the national, which, in turn, plays a major role in perpetuating the problem of poor political governance in Solomon Islands. It is a vicious cycle: people vote locally because the state is weak, yet by voting locally they help keep it that way.

Escaping the Vicious Cycle

Solomon Islanders are not alone in their local voting behaviour. This sort of voting — part of what political scientists call clientelism — can be found across the developing world, as well as in the histories (and sometimes even the present) of OECD countries. Clearly, as the non-clientelist politics of most OECD states shows, it is possible for countries to evolve out of clientelism, although political scientists are divided on how such escapes occur. Fukuyama (2013) provides a good summary of potential explanations. Of these, the avenue for transformation that would seem to hold the most promise for Solomon Islands is the rise of national-level social movements. Plausibly, such movements might be able to inspire voters into believing that national-level change is at stake in elections, while at the same time providing them with a means of collective action capable of bringing such change about. This, it needs to be emphasised, is far from guaranteed, although the recent rise of a new

generation of social movements in Solomon Islands (for now still small and Honiara-based) offers some cause for optimism here.

For actors such as donors, there are two key lessons. First, politics is central in determining governance in Solomon Islands. The fundamental causes of poor governance are not technical or capacity-based, but stem instead from the electoral incentives politicians face. Second, the problems of politics in Solomon Islands are in an equilibrium state of sorts (the vicious cycle). They will not be easily shifted, least of all by external actors, although outside entities can still play an important role in holding key institutions together, and, through this, in providing space for domestic change to occur.

References

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